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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Well, we had a little taste of good weather for awhile, but that has quickly disappeared. With all of the rain that we've had over the past month or so, parts of my lawn have been looking great; I even mowed some of it this past week. The post-Winter/Spring clean-up has just about completed, and time to get my gardens back into shape - they're a real mess this year! It will take some patience and time, but I'll get there eventually. For now, I'm just waiting to be able to see the sun again and feel some warm[er] temperatures.

It's been a long week here, and as usual, I'm spent. I've been involved in a bunch of other projects the past couple of weeks and haven't spent too much time thinking of editorial commentaries. I was considering adding to my online bullying comments from last week, but I'll hold off on that for a bit. The topic isn't going anywhere, and many new developments are getting some publicity. I'll see where that is headed before I get into that subject again soon.

So, it appears that this weekend is going to be one where I'll have no excuses for not kicking back a little and getting some well-earned rest. I hope that you will be able to do the same!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Another week (two, actually) has come and gone, and again there aren't a lot of posts in the NewsGroup.

It's been a hectic couple of weeks here. I don't remember if I'd told you, but a friend was in a car accident almost three weeks ago, and had to have surgery for a fractured vertebra in his neck. He's now got a titanium rod and screws in that bone.

Now, that’s serious enough, but he’s also got cystic fibrosis, which makes his lungs and other organs less than they should be. I mentioned his lungs because that’s the major point of contention right now. His lung capacity is down to 60 percent, and he spent three days on a respirator after the surgery, which was done on Easter morning.

Now, he’s been unable to work for several years, and is on disability. I don’t know what he’s got for insurance, but I’m guessing that Medicaid is the major resource here.

I can’t even imagine what the costs for the surgery, ICU (now called CCU for ’Critical Care Unit’), round-the-clock monitoring, medications, doctors and other medical staff are going to amount to. Whatever it is, I’m sure it’s going to be an astronomical number.

Now, when he went to the emergency room right after the accident, they took x-rays of his neck and said that everything looked okay, but that he had some strained ligaments or tendons and they sent him off with some muscle relaxers and told him to take extra strength Tylenol for the pain.

The hospital called him the following morning and asked him to go back for a CT Scan or an MRI (I don’t remember which now). Well, they found a fracture on the second vertebra in his neck... a serious thing. He’s lucky he’s not paralyzed from the neck down. After that, they had to decide whether to try to let it heal on its own or go for the surgery. The problem seemed to be that the fracture was something that tended to "open up" when he moved his neck. That’s a very bad situation.

So, despite the dangers of surgery because of the cystic fibrosis, they decided to operate. The surgery took somewhere on the order of two and a half hours, and he spent the entire time on his stomach, restrained head and body so that the surgeon(s) could work without him moving. That’s a bad thing for someone with lung problems.

To make a long story... a little less long, the surgery was a success, but he spent 4 days on a respirator and is even now still on oxygen. His lungs took a beating, and he’s still recovering from it.

Will his lungs fully recover? Hopefully. But regardless, he’s got insurance in the form of Medicaid to cover the bills... or, most of the bills, anyway. I’m still not sure what they’ll cover and what they won’t.

Now, Medicaid is ’sort of’ a government program, but not really. Not like Social Security or Medicare. Social Security and Medicare are things that most of us pay into. Medicaid is paid for jointly by the federal and state governments and is based on need. It is not an entitlement program. It is there for the people who need it regardless of what or whether they’ve paid into the system (in the form of taxes).

Now, without this program, I don’t know if this surgery could have been done. It is, as I said before, quite expensive. So what would have happened to this friend of mine had he not had some form of support?

My only guess is that he would have become a ward of the state, had any and all property (which is basically nothing) taken from him and he would have been institutionalized until he died from whichever ailment it was that finally took him, be it a damaged nerve cord or lungs unable to do their job.

This particular case shows the most dire need of just about anything you

could point to. An individual without means, without resources, who requires medical attention. If he had been able to afford some sort of commercial health care... from one of the big insurance companies or a "public option", he would still be getting the care he needed/needs, and the premiums would be paid for by him instead of the tab (minus deductibles) being picked up by the sate/federal governments.

What's the difference? Well, an actual insurance policy could have mitigated costs somewhat. Particularly as some envision what health care insurance should be. Make insurance companies listen to the doctors instead of their lawyers. Let doctors pay less malpractice insurance (the percentage of money paid out in malpractice suits as opposed to the premiums collected is astonishingly small) so that they can afford to charge us less. Make the drug companies have to 'make deals' on some of their drugs... so that we, the insured, can afford to pay for them ourselves instead of griping about having to pay ten bucks for a month's supply of something. Most of us can afford to do that. And for those who can't, there should be help. But that will allow insurance companies to cut their pay-outs... paying for some of our own drugs and our own office visits wouldn't be too bad, and it would be offset by the lower premiums we'd be paying.

Insurance companies... now THERE'S a thorny problem. Should we just outright tell them that they can't turn a profit? Of course not. But is there really a way of justifying BILLIONS in profits every year? Millions of dollars in bonuses? They DO need to do R&D to come up with new drugs... new antibiotics, new treatments that don't have some of the terrible possible side effects or toxic elements. But we haven't seen much of that now, and that's kind of what we thought we were paying for, wasn't it?

I try to be very careful when talking about cutting costs and curbing spending. You can cut spending to the bone, but then all you're left with is bone. And the corporate mentality is to keep the savings coming at a better rate for next year. So what do you cut after you've cut to the bone?

A better way, in my opinion, is for all of us to accept responsibility for ourselves. I've already mentioned paying for some of our own prescriptions and office visits, but how about taking better care of ourselves? Making ourselves as healthy as we can be would be a good start. Eating right, exercising, things like chiropractic and even acupuncture are less invasive and less costly than surgery or long-term care.

True, many of us will end up needing long-term care, but we can minimize it and put it off for longer if we take some responsibility and take steps in that direction.

I imagine there's more than one hand raised right now, poised to mention fraud. Yeah, there is fraud. And we do have to weed it out and stop it. But you know that old adage about an ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure. Let's find a way to prevent it instead of spending millions upon millions of dollars every day to examine most claims with the anticipation of them being frauds. The first and foremost aim of any form of health care insurance should be providing for those who need it, not looking for whether its a scam.

Well, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - US Game Sales Revived in March!
""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Happy Birthday, Tempest 2000!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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US Videogame Sales Revived in March

US videogame sales in March broke a losing streak blamed in part on tough economic times, new figures released Thursday by NPD Group showed.

Revenue tallied 1.52 billion dollars, six percent higher than the 1.44 billion dollars brought in during the same month a year earlier, according to NPD.

Nintendo dominated the videogame hardware category, selling 557,500 of its Wii consoles and a record-setting 700,800 DS hand-held playing devices.

"Demand for Nintendo fun continues unabated," said Cammie Dunaway, Nintendo of America's executive vice president of Sales & Marketing.

"We're glad so many people are able to get their hands on our systems as we prepare for the May launches of 'Super Mario Galaxy 2' for Wii and 'Picross 3D' for our Nintendo DS systems."

The latest installment in a blockbuster "God of War" franchise tailored for exclusive play on Sony PlayStation consoles was the top-selling videogame, with 1.1 million units bought after it launched mid-March, NPD reported.

A "Pokemon Soulsilver" videogame crafted for Nintendo DS hand-held devices was the second best seller, with 1.02 million copies bought.

"Final Fantasy XIII" versions for PlayStation and Microsoft Xbox 360 consoles proved the third hottest title, selling 828,200 copies.

Prices for videogame hardware were lower than they were in March of last year, according to NPD analyst Anita Frazier.

Money taken in from sales of devices slipped from 457.1 million dollars in March of 2009 to to 440.5 million dollars in the same month this year.

While videogame software prices remained flat, sales jumped 10 percent

to 875.3 million dollars in the year-over-year comparison by NPD.

US videogame sales during the first two months of the year had slipped from the previous year, defying optimism that the industry would rebound on a reviving economy.

The inauspicious start to 2010 came after the prior year finished with videogame sales in the three leading markets - Britain, Japan and the United States - down eight percent to 379.3 million units.

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->A-ONE Gaming Online - Online Users Growl & Purr!

This Day in History: Happy Birthday, Tempest 2000

April 13, 1994: Atari ships Jeff Minter’s Tempest 2000, the highlight of its Jaguar library.

On this day in 1994, Atari began shipping Tempest 2000 for its Jaguar home console, often considered the highlight of the system.

Tempest 2000 was a then-modern update to Atari’s original 1980 arcade game. While the original used a vector monitor to simulate its 3D perspective and vanishing point, this update used the built-in 3D capabilities of the Jaguar itself to achieve its effects.

The game was designed by Jeff Minter a British programmer and llama enthusiast known for his impressive and often psychedelic visual effects.

"We are pleased to offer Jaguar players Tempest 2000, which has already captured the attention and praise of the industry’s leading game publications," said Atari president Sam Tramiel in a press release issued that day. "Tempest 2000 has hit the ground running - Jaguar’s 64-bit technology has allowed us to make one of the industry’s most exciting, challenging games even more outstanding."

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Senators: Move Carefully on Pentagon Cyber Command

Senators said Thursday they will move cautiously on a new military command to tackle cyberthreats, citing questions about how the U.S. would conduct electronic warfare.

The U.S. hasn’t fully developed policies on how to respond to cyberattacks that are routed through neutral countries or the computers of innocent Americans, several senators said during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on the nomination of Lt. Gen. Keith Alexander to head the Pentagon’s Cyber Command.

Technology has outpaced the development of policies to guide computer-based combat, said the committee chairman, Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich.

Levin asked Alexander about how he would respond to various cyberthreat scenarios, and said operations to combat such attacks "could have broad and damaging consequences."

Alexander agreed that an attack against America’s privately operated power grid, launched from another country but routed through the computers of unsuspecting U.S. citizens, poses difficult questions that the Pentagon and other agencies are trying to answer.

Alexander said the new command is "not about an effort to militarize cyberspace," but is about safeguarding the integrity of the networks and improving the way the U.S. defends itself in cyberspace.

US Diplomat Criticizes Australia’s Web Filter

There are ways to police illegal material on the Internet without resorting to a mandatory filter such as the one proposed by Australia’s government, a U.S. diplomat says.

The comments by Jeff Bleich, the U.S. ambassador to Australia, to the Australian news program "Q&A" on Monday came barely two weeks after the U.S. State Department expressed concern about the online restrictions, which would make Australia one of the strictest Internet regulators among the world’s democracies.

"The Internet needs to be free," Bleich said. "We have been able to accomplish the goals that Australia has described, which is to capture and prosecute child pornographers ... without having to use Internet filters."

Bleich said Washington was sharing with Canberra other methods of combating illegal content.

Australian Communications Minister Stephen Conroy says the filter would block access to sites that include child pornography, sexual violence and detailed instructions in crime or drug use.

The plan needs the support of Parliament to become law later this year.

Some critics of Australia’s proposed filter have said it puts the nation in the same censorship league as China, and Internet giants Google and Yahoo have criticized the plan as heavy-handed.

The U.S. State Department said last month that open Internet access encouraged economic prosperity and the free flow of information.

Israel Bans Imports of Apple iPad

Israel has banned imports of Apple Inc.’s hottest new product, the iPad, citing concerns the powerful gadget’s wireless signals could disrupt other devices.

Customs officials said Thursday they have already confiscated about 10 of the lightweight tablet computers since Israel announced the new regulations this week. The ban prevents anyone - even tourists - from bringing iPads into Israel until officials certify that they comply with local transmitter standards.

The U.S. Federal Communications Commission allows devices with Wi-Fi capability to broadcast at higher power levels than are allowed in Europe and Israel - meaning that the iPad’s stronger signal could throw off others’ wireless connections, Schubert said.

"If you operate equipment in a frequency band which is different from the others that operate on that frequency band, then there will be interference," said Nati Schubert, a senior deputy director for the Communications Ministry. "We don’t care where people buy their equipment. ... But without regulation, you would have chaos."

Some Israelis successfully got the popular devices into Israel before the ban.

Amnon, a software developer who legally brought an iPad into Israel but asked that his last name be withheld to avoid potential government repercussions, said he and other high-tech businessmen need the iPad to develop new applications for the device.

"There are several hundred people in Israel who make their livelihood developing apps ... and there are going to be companies that suffer, because they can’t deliver the services they’re supposed to be delivering," he said.

The iPad combines the features of a notebook computer with the touch-pad functions of the iPod. It went on sale in the U.S. on April 3. Apple this week delayed its international launch until May 10, citing heavy sales in the U.S.

Israeli officials said the ban has nothing to do with trade and is simply a precaution to assure that the iPad doesn’t affect wireless devices already in use in Israel.

Although Israeli standards are similar to those in many European nations, Israel is the only country so far to officially ban imports.

Schubert said he expects the problem to be resolved as Apple moves closer to the international release.

In the meantime, confiscated iPads will be held by customs - for a daily storage fee - until their owners depart the country or ship the gadgets back to the U.S. at their own expense.

Apple’s chief distributor in Israel, iDigital, declined to comment on the Communications Ministry’s decision, and messages left at Apple’s headquarters in California were not immediately returned.

Young Adults Concerned But Naive About Privacy

US young adults care about their online privacy just as much as older Americans, but they tend to be more naive, a study released Thursday found.

Hot trends in online social networking, geolocation services, and firing off musings in Twitter messages are not a sign that privacy is less important to the younger generation than to its predecessors, according to the research.

"We are not arguing that young adults don’t do foolish things on Facebook," said study co-author Joseph Turow, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania Annenberg School for Communication.

"Some of them may do silly things, but a huge percentage of them care. We find there is rather little difference between young adults and people who are older when you talk to them about privacy."

The real difference lay in how much adults aged 18 through 24 believed their online privacy was protected by law, he said.

"The general population thinks the government protects them more than it does, but young adults even more so," Turow told AFP.

Factors that may prompt young adults to be more cavalier with information online include peer pressure to be part of Internet social networks and natural tendencies toward risky behavior.

Turow cautioned that more research regarding what older adults do online is needed for a true comparison of the behavior of different age groups on the Internet.

"It is possible older adults do... foolish things," Turow said.

"They may not show up naked as much but they may get in trouble saying bad things about a boss or with a picture of them golfing when they are supposed to be off sick."

Young adults need education about the degree to which their online privacy is legally guarded and security settings at social-networking websites should be tight by default, study authors suggested.

The study by Annenberg and the law school at the University of California, Berkeley, was based on a random sampling of 1,000 adults surveyed by telephone last year.

Family: Pennsylvania School Snared 1,000s of Webcam Images

A suburban Philadelphia school district snapped secret webcam pictures of

a high school student when he was partially undressed or sleeping in his bed, and captured instant messages he exchanged with friends, the student charged in court papers this week.

The Lower Merion School District concedes its efforts to find missing school-issued laptops was misguided, and officials vowed anew Friday to release the findings of their internal investigation, "good and bad."

The LANrev software program took screen shots and webcam photos every 15 seconds when activated. The district thereby captured over 400 screen shots and webcam images of Harriton High School sophomore Blake Robbins, according to court filings this week in his lawsuit.

The suit, filed in February, exposed the tracking program and prompted an FBI investigation into possible wiretap violations, along with debate among parents about whether to support the potential class-action lawsuit.

"A substantial number of webcam photos have been recovered in the investigation," school board President David Ebby said in a statement Friday. "As we have made clear since day one, we are committed to providing all of the facts - good and bad - at the conclusion of the investigation."

Lawyers involved in the case met Friday afternoon to discuss pending issues in the case.

Mark Haltzman, who filed the lawsuit on behalf of Robbins and his family, said evidence now shows the district used the tracking software for non-authorized reasons - for instance, when students failed to pay the required insurance or return the laptops at year’s end. At least once, a name mix-up led the district to activate the wrong student’s laptop, he charged.

"Thousands of webcam pictures and screen shots have been taken of numerous other students in their homes, many of which never reported their laptops lost or missing," Haltzman wrote in a motion filed Thursday.

According to Haltzman, technology coordinator Carol Cafiero refused to answer his questions at a recent deposition, citing her Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination. She and technician Michael Perbix were the only employees authorized to activate the webcams. Perbix did not fight the deposition.

Haltzman called Cafiero a possible "voyeur" and wants access to her personal computer to see if she downloaded any student images. To support the charge, he cited her response to an e-mail from a colleague who said viewing the webcam pictures was like watching "a little LMSD soap opera."

"I know, I love it!" Cafiero allegedly replied.

Her lawyer, Charles Mandracchia, did not immediately return a message Friday, but has said his client did nothing wrong. Cafiero makes $105,000 and Perbix $86,000. Both are on paid leave.

The wealthy suburban district - which spent about $21,600 per student in 2008-2009, nearly twice the amount spent on Philadelphia students - issues $1,000 Macintosh laptops to 2,300 students at two high schools.

Despite widespread concern about the alleged spying, hundreds of parents

have signed on to oppose the Robbins family's suit for financial and other reasons. The district, meanwhile, insists it has no evidence of any intentional misuse of the tracking program.

Meanwhile, U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, D-Pa., introduced a bill Thursday to treat video surveillance the same as electronic communication under the federal Wiretap Act.

"Citizens should not have to fear that cameras on their cell phones or computers - common features on many of today's personal electronic devices - will be used in their homes without their knowledge to invade their privacy rights," said Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., a co-sponsor.

Facebook Unveils Revamped Online Safety Site

Facebook is unveiling a revamped internal site designed to help people stay safe while surfing online.

Facebook's "Safety Center," which features new tools for parents, teachers, teens and law enforcement, is the first major endeavor from the social networking site and its four-month-old global safety advisory board.

The board is composed of Internet safety groups Common Sense Media, ConnectSafely, WiredSafety, Childnet International and The Family Online Safety Institute.

Some new features of the safety center include four times more content on staying safe, such as dealing with bullying online, an interactive portal and a simpler design.

The presence of sexual predators is a problem for social networking sites and their users.

Previously, Facebook, based in Palo Alto, Calif., has helped identify, and has disabled accounts of, registered sex offenders. In 2008, Facebook said it agreed to assist 49 Attorneys General to protect kids against Internet predators.

Twitter To Have Paid Tweets Show Up in Searches

Twitter announced Tuesday that it is introducing advertising, allowing companies to pay to have their messages show up first in searches on its site.

The introduction of Promoted Tweets comes as Twitter increasingly faces questions about how to turn its wide usage into profits.

Twitter has grown quickly in popularity since it started in 2006, with celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey and Ashton Kutcher "tweeting" messages of 140 characters or less alongside everyday users.

But the site has been slow to capitalize on that success.

Twitter has been making an undisclosed amount of money by providing

Google Inc. and Microsoft Corp. with access to messages for their search engines. Many people expected Twitter would eventually introduce advertising.

In a blog post Tuesday, company co-founder Biz Stone said the company took its time "because we wanted to optimize for value before profit." He said the company understood that many people have been frustrated by its "stubborn insistence on a slow and thoughtful approach to monetization."

Twitter said Best Buy Co., Sony Pictures, Starbucks Corp. and Virgin America are some of the advertisers using what Promoted Tweets.

The new Promoted Tweets are to be "called out" as ads on top of search results on Twitter, much as sponsors can pay for listings atop rankings on search engines such as Google, Microsoft's Bing and Yahoo. That means Twitter users would see the new ads when they search broadly for topics being tweeted about.

However, many users connect with the service not through such searches or even visits to the site. Rather, scores of outside programmers have written mobile and desktop software that can access the feeds of Twitter messages that users get from people they are "following" on the site.

Twitter said it might take the Promoted Tweets service further and make them also show up on those feeds.

Stone said Promoted Tweets will need to resonate with users. If a Promoted Tweet isn't replied to or forwarded by other users, it will disappear.

German Tablet PC Sets Out To Rival Apple's iPad

The German maker of a new tablet PC is setting out to rival Apple's iPad with the promise of even more technology such as a bigger screen, a webcam and USB ports.

It is not, however, an "iPad killer" as it has been dubbed by some blogs but an alternative to its bigger rival, Neofonie GmbH's founder and managing director Helmut Hoffer von Ankershoffen told reporters on Monday in Berlin.

Ankershoffen stressed the system's openness: Two USB ports allow users to connect all kinds of devices with the WePad, from external keyboards to data sticks.

People who want to put music on their WePad do not have to have any particular software, Ankershoffen said - a blow at Apple's devices that require particular Apple software like iTunes.

The WePad's basic version, which comes with Wi-Fi and 16-gigabyte storage, is set to cost euro449 ($600), the larger 32-gigabyte version with a fast 3G modem is euro569.

Ankershoffen claimed that given its technological superiority and greater openness, "that's a bargain compared with the iPad."

The iPad - which hit stores in the U.S. less than a month ago - is on sale there starting at $499 for the smallest version, coming with Wi-Fi and a 16 GB storage.

The WePad, with its 11.6-inch screen, is powered by an Intel chip and relies on a Linux software basis which is compatible with Google's Android and all Flash applications, Ankershoffen said.

When it hits stores starting late July, it will also boast a complete open source office package, he said.

Reporters could not test the device at the press conference.

Berlin-based Neofonie - a small company of some 180 employees - claims it already has some 20,000 people interested in signing up for a pre-order, even though orders won't be formally accepted before April 27.

Ankershoffen declined to give a sales estimate. "Not thousands, not tens of thousands but many more will be sold before the end of the year," he said.

The WePad is to be assembled by a manufacturer in Asia - which Ankershoffen refused to name - that can ramp up production capacity according to demand, he said

Neofonie casts the WePad as helping the media industry find a way to market paid content and hopes to appeal to publishers, some of whom are disgruntled with Apple's pricing policy and restrictions.

The device would allow publishers to sell their content on its platform without monopolizing the customer relationship, as Apple's iTunes or Amazon's Kindle do, the company said.

Gruner + Jahr, one of Europe's largest magazine publishers, already has a partnership with Neofonie, offering the company's flagship magazine, Stern, on the platform.

"It will be the first magazine, but others will certainly follow," Stern's deputy chief Tobias Seikel said at the press conference.

Germany's biggest publisher, Berlin-based Axel Springer AG, is in talks with Neofonie, but no cooperation is planned yet, spokesman Christian Garrels said.

"We want to offer our company's brands on several platforms with a high range," Garrels told The Associated Press.

The company's flagship daily, Bild, previously had trouble with its iPhone application because Apple censors sexually explicit content, such as the paper's daily nude photo.

Apple's iPad will go on sale in Germany at the end of April, according to the company's Web site. This would give the iPad roughly a three month lead on its German competitor.

Neofonie seems determined to face its big California rival: The company distributed tasty red apples boasting the WePad's logo at the press conference.

However, both companies have to prove that the touch screen device will

not only amaze the tech-savvy early users, but will also appeal to mainstream consumers at a time when people have already a lot of Internet-connected gadgets - smart phones, laptops, e-book readers, set-top boxes and home broadband connections.

Google Working on Android-Based Tablet

Well, that didn't take long. The hoopla surrounding the Apple iPad has died down somewhat, so naturally, the question becomes, who's next? If The New York Times is to be believed, Google is next in line for tablet glory.

The paper reported Sunday that Google will soon start selling "its version of a slate computer." The device would be "an e-reader that would function like a computer," the Times said.

Apparently, Google CEO Eric Schmidt was talking about the company's tablet at a recent party. It would be Android-based, but few other details have emerged. Google is reportedly operating in "stealth mode" with only a few publishers, the /Times/ said.

The paper also said that Nokia is working on a slate/e-reader of its own.

Apple Updates MacBook Pro Laptop Line

Apple Inc has updated its line of high-end laptops with faster processors, better graphics and longer battery life, as the company continues to take share in the personal computer market.

Apple said on Tuesday its 13-inch, 15-inch and 17-inch MacBook Pro notebooks were refreshed with more powerful Intel processors and new graphics chips from Nvidia.

The 13-inch model, which starts at $1,199, boasts up to 10 hours of battery life, Apple said.

The company said its new 15-inch and 17-inch MacBook Pro models, which start at $1,799 and $2,299 respectively, are up to 50 percent faster than their predecessors, with eight to nine hours of battery life.

Apple, which is set to announce quarterly results next week, is the No. 5 maker of personal computers in the United States, according to industry tracker IDC.

In the final quarter of 2009, Apple's computer shipments surged 33 percent to 3.36 million units.

Next Act for Google: Printing from Any Device to Any Printer

Having made encyclopedias, paper maps, and newspapers redundant, Google is now out to do the same for printer drivers. The search giant said Thursday that it is developing a cloud-based solution for driverless

printing from any device.

In a posting on its Chromium Blog, Group Product Manager Mike Jazayeri wrote that "developing and maintaining print subsystems for every combination of hardware and operating system," including the large and growing number of mobile devices, "simply isn't feasible."

He noted that all major computing devices and OSes have one component in common - access to the cloud. With that in mind, the company is introducing "some preliminary designs" for its Google Cloud Print project, which will be a service that allows any application on "any device to print to any printer."

Google Cloud Print will handle the preparation for the printing and status reporting, with options selected by the user. The computing device, such as a smartphone, uses either a web app or a native, desktop-based app, which calls Google Cloud Print APIs. The APIs show the user interface and job status, and communicates with a "cloud-aware" printer. Alternatively, the API could talk to another cloud-aware device, such as a PC, which then talks to a legacy printer.

While it's still under development, Jazayeri said Google is making the code and documentation publicly available as part of its Chromium and Chromium OS projects.

Although Cloud Print will be a web service provided by Google, the company said it expects that other such services will also evolve. The APIs will also be available to third-party developers to embed into their apps.

The printers are, of course, the biggest issue. Google said dealing with them depends on whether they are cloud-aware or a legacy printer. If a printer has native support for cloud print services, there is no requirement for it to have a PC connection or a printer driver. The company admits one unfortunate fact - cloud-aware printers don't exist yet. But it said it is "confident" that this open-source initiative will encourage manufacturers to develop open-protocol, cloud-aware printers.

Legacy printers - which Google acknowledges include "every printer in existence today" - are not only connected to PCs, or to Ethernet/Wi-Fi networks, but are also the recently released web-enabled printers, such as those from Hewlett Packard. The HP printers are not what Google calls cloud-aware printers, because they don't know how to communicate with a cloud-based print service. To handle legacy printers, some software acting as a proxy would reside on the computer to which a printer is connected.

The proxy, which is being developed for Windows, Mac and Linux, will be distributed with the Google Chrome browser. The Chrome OS will also use Cloud Print for all printing, but the browser can print directly to the cloud without the OS.

Laura DiDio, a research fellow with Information Technology Intelligence Corp., likes the idea of a cloud print service, but said "as with any panacea, there are going to pluses and minuses."

She noted that reducing dependency on printer drivers would be in the plus category, as user management of driver updates, such as for operating systems or new equipment, can become burdensome and complicated.

The minuses, DiDio said, include the fact that one’s Internet connection could be unreliable and that the ecosystem seems oriented toward Google’s web applications.

US Government Admits Most Piracy Studies Are Nonsense

A major setback for those that claim piracy is having an adverse affect on the US economy: the US Government Accountability Office, who was tasked with reviewing the efforts to find out what, if any, impact piracy has on the US economy, has concluded that all of these studies - all of them - are bogus. Better yet - the GAO even goes as far as to say that piracy may have a positive effect on the economy.

Over the course of the years, we’ve been subjected to numerous doom and gloom studies from organisations like the MPAA, RIAA, and BSA, which contained figures supposedly coming from government sources. These reports would get widespread coverage in the media and would influence government policy regarding IP enforcement to a rather great degree.

Consequently, US Congress decided back in April 2009 to task the Government Accountability Office with investigating these reports to assess their validity. Released Monday, the report tears all of these reports to shreds, and I’m not overstating things here; the validity of each and every one of these reports is highly questionable, according to the GAO.

Of the three most often-cited studies, the GAO states that they "cannot be substantiated due to the absence of underlying studies. Each method (of measuring) has limitations, and most experts observed that it is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify the economy-wide impacts." They state that the oft-made assumption that each pirated product constitutes a lost sale is just an "assumption". Some figures used in the reports were attributed to the FBI, to which the FBI replied they have no records of said figures. Loosely translated: big content made them up.

Furthermore, the GAO even concludes that piracy may have a positive effect on the economy, for instance because it leaves consumers with more money to spend elsewhere. On top of that - and I personally believe this is a far more important aspect that gets deliberately neglected by the content industry - people may use illegal downloading to sample content. In other words, without such sampling, they would be buying less media, not more.

"Some experts we interviewed and literature we reviewed identified potential positive economic effects of counterfeiting and piracy. Some consumers may knowingly purchase a counterfeit or pirated product because it is less expensive than the genuine good or because the genuine good is unavailable, and they may experience positive effects from such purchases," the GAO concludes, "Consumers may use pirated goods to ’sample’ music, movies, software, or electronic games before purchasing legitimate copies. [This] may lead to increased sales of legitimate goods."

Still, this doesn’t mean piracy is not a problem - the GAO report calls it "sizeable" - it just means we haven’t been able yet to really gauge its impact, contrary to what big content wants you (and your government) to believe.

This report will most likely quickly disappear out of view due to President Obama’s close ties to big content and his support for ACTA. It seems that

this is a battle the EU parliament will have to fight for the world, since individual member states in the EU certainly won't be doing anything (Hi France! Hi UK!), and I have little hope for Obama to step away from all that juicy MPAA/RIAA campaign money.

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